

THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ELLERY QUEEN®

- 6 **The Fever Tree** / Ruth Rendell
- 22 **Mr. Strang and the Lost Ship** / William Brittain
- 35 **Address Unknown** / Joyce Harrington
- 50 **Ukridge Starts a Bank Account** / P. G. Wodehouse
- 65 **Death Warmed Over** / Charles Peterson
- 74 **Golf Nut** / Wade H. Mosby
- 77 **Sideswipe** / James Holding
- 97 **The Shadow Behind the Face** / Peter Godfrey
- 106 **The Good Times Always End** / David Morrell
- 115 **The Woman I Envied** / George Baxt
- 125 **A Hell of a Story** / H. R. F. Keating
- 129 **Murder Off Limits** / Jack Ritchie
- 140 **The Spy at the Film Festival** / Edward D. Hoch

- 89 **Mystery Newsletter** / R. E. Porter & Chris Steinbrunner
- 94 **The Jury Box** / Jon L. Breen

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a NEW Henry Turnbuckle story by

JACK RITCHIE

How and where can a professional killer meet four different people who want their wives dead? Especially wealthy wives? . . . Pure, unadulterated Ritchie, with a feast of "sheer, relentless deduction" by one of our favorite Henrys . . .

MURDER OFF LIMITS

by JACK RITCHIE

"Ralph," I said, "during the last five months four women have met violent deaths. I am convinced that they were murdered by the same man."

"Henry, whenever we run across a chain murderer, hasn't he always been thoughtful enough to send us letters either before he murders, or after? We haven't gotten any letters."

"Nor are we likely to, Ralph. The very last thing in the world this man wants is for us to know that he is operating in the vicinity."

"What four women?" Ralph asked.

I opened a large brown envelope and took out the Xeroxed copies of the newspaper clippings. "In order of their demise, five months ago a Mrs. Elizabeth Thompson was shot and killed in her home in Fox Point. The police there concluded that she had been killed by an intruder, perhaps a burglar. A month later a Mrs. Elaine Whitecliff, of Grafton, was bludgeoned to death in her bedroom. Again the authorities assumed an intruder. Six weeks ago a Mrs. Emily Kearney met her death while walking her grounds. She was strangled. And the day before yesterday a Mrs. Marianne Trestle received fatal stab wounds while in her gazebo reading *Better Homes and Gardens*."

"So what ties them together?"

© 1982 by Jack Ritchie.

"Ralph, it was not until this last murder that a suspicion formed in my mind that there was something drastically wrong. I don't save newspaper items—except for an occasional recipe—so to refresh my memory I went to the morgue at the *Journal*, reread the accounts of the murders, and then had them Xeroxed."

Ralph waited patiently.

"Each of the victims was married and in each case the husband had a perfect alibi for the time of the murder. Thompson was giving a speech at a banquet, Whitecliff playing bridge with some business associates, Kearney at a board meeting, and Trestle at his country-club golf course in a foursome which included a federal judge. The newspaper accounts mentioned these facts because, I suppose, everyone automatically suspects the husband in the case of wife murder, and they wanted to get that point out of the way immediately."

Ralph shrugged. "So they had alibis. What's wrong with that?"

"But *four* murders of *four rich* women, and *four* husbands with perfect alibis?" I chuckled significantly. "That's just too much coincidence to swallow."

"And so you think they were all murdered by some nut with something against rich women?"

"Not quite that, Ralph. No, four murders of four rich women whose husbands had perfect alibis all point to one thing. A *hired* killer. A professional murderer."

Ralph dragged his feet as he accompanied me to Captain Johnson's office.

The captain listened to my story, read the copies of the clippings, and then looked at the ceiling.

"Henry, didn't you notice that every one of the victims was killed in a suburb? In other words, it's out of our jurisdiction. It's not our beat."

"But sir," I said in respectful protest, "we can't just ignore this. We can't let it lie there."

"Henry, I'm not going to let it lie there. I'll make a few phone calls to the police departments concerned and let them take it from there. But that's as far as I'm going, Henry. Like I said, it's not our beat."

Ralph and I spent our day on more local matters. At the end of our shift, however, I had made up my mind. "Ralph, I simply cannot leave those murders alone. Do you realize how difficult it is to get *two* suburban police departments to coordinate, much less *four*? What this case needs is one brain, one central intelligence to pull all the pieces together."

"Henry, the captain said no."

"I'll be doing this on my own time, Ralph, and at no cost to the department. Tomorrow is my day off."

When I got home to my apartment, I went through my recipe drawer until I found the clipping for chipped beef casserole and made supper. After eating and then doing the dishes, I put my Beethoven String Quartets on the record player and sat in my easy chair. I filled and lit my meerschaum and proceeded to cogitate.

Investigating the murders by the direct approach was out. My alien presence would certainly antagonize the suburban police. No, I must remain out of professional channels. I must solve the murders largely through sheer relentless deduction—a course which did not daunt me in the least.

Four men had hired someone to rid them of their wives, for one reason or another. Was it possible that these four men had hired four *different* killers? Possible, yes. Probable, no. Until proved otherwise, I would work on the assumption that they all hired the same man.

If I wanted to hire someone to kill my wife—if I had one—how would I go about it? How would I find *anybody* to kill her, much less a professional killer? Certainly one couldn't go about asking people if they were professional killers or knew of one available.

No, wasn't it more likely—or at least worthy of consideration—that the professional killer did the seeking? Found his customers?

If I were a professional killer, I would very likely have to do a lot of traveling, wouldn't I? Besides the danger of remaining in one region too long, there was also the probability that one could drain an area dry of prospects.

Yes, I would have to travel. Perhaps a year in one part of the country and then move on. But how would I find my clients? Wealthy ones, of course. Not that the poor and the middle classes are immune to the urge to kill their wives, but one must go where the real money was.

How does one go about soliciting murder from the rich? Does one barge into their offices or boardrooms and ask them if they want their wives eliminated? Of course not.

No, one would have to meet them under more relaxed and private circumstances. Over a drink, perhaps. Or quite a few drinks. Where would that be? How can a professional killer meet four different people who want their wives dead?

I frowned over the newspaper clippings again and then I thought

I had the answer. Trestle had been on the Raddison Country Club's golf course at the time his wife was being murdered. What better place to hobnob with the rich than at a country club? Especially at the nineteenth hole.

Did all four of the involved husbands by any chance belong to the same country club? That was worth checking out.

I turned to the yellow pages of the phone book, found the listings for country clubs, and then dialed.

A neutral voice, probably an employee's, answered the phone. "Raddison Country Club."

"I'm from out of town," I said. "I'm supposed to meet James Whitecliff at his country club. But unfortunately Jimmy forgot to tell me which country club he belongs to and so I've been phoning around. Do you have a James Whitecliff as a member?"

"Yes, sir. Shall I have him paged?"

"You needn't bother. I'll be there in a little while. Oh, by the way, while I'm at it, I believe another one of my friends belongs to your club too. Franklin Kearney?"

"Yes, sir. I just saw him going into the bar."

"Thank you." I hung up.

Well, well, so Trestle, Whitecliff, and Kearney belonged to the same club. I thought that for now I could assume that Thompson did too, though I would verify that tomorrow.

I slept rather well that night, and in the morning, after breakfast, went down to my car.

It was a forty-minute drive to the Raddison Country Club. A small, almost inconspicuous, sign at the driveway entrance reminded one that this was a private country club, but there was no gate or gate-keeper to enforce any restriction. I drove up to the main building, parking in a well-shaded parking lot, and entered the structure via the bar.

I spoke to the small elderly bartender. "Could you tell me where I might find the secretary of the club?"

"Mr. Tarleton? I haven't seen him for a couple of days."

"Oh," I said, wondering where to go from there.

He studied me for a moment. "You want to see him on club business?"

"Well, yes."

"In that case you might want to see O'Higgins. Mr. Tarleton is a club member and has the title, but O'Higgins does the work. He's

paid. Like me. His office is on the lower level, turn right where you came in."

I retraced my steps and did as directed, walking a narrow dim corridor to the door reading *Secretary*.

I found a small cluttered office and a tall man with a slightly harried expression on his face.

"Yes, sir, what can I do for you?"

"Can you tell me if a Mr. Mathew Thompson belong to this club?"

He debated with himself for a moment as to whether that might be top secret or not and then nodded. "Yes, sir. He does."

That linked the quartet. "This is a restricted club, isn't it?"

His eyes showed sudden worry. "By *no* means, sir. We have two Jewish, one Mohammedan, two blacks, and one—"

I held up a hand. "I meant restricted in *numbers*."

He was relieved. "Yes, sir. We keep our membership steady at three hundred. And their dependents, of course."

"And when a vacancy occurs, you fill that vacancy?"

"Yes, sir. When somebody dies, or leaves the area, or simply resigns, though very few people have ever done anything that radical."

"And how do you fill these vacancies? From applications on file?"

"Well, not quite, sir. The new member has to be recommended by at least three members. Then he is interviewed by the Admissions Panel and a decision is made."

I had hit a snag. How the devil could a professional murderer get three recommendations to join an exclusive club?

I pondered while O'Higgins watched, apprehension returning. Then I had it. Of course. One of our murderer's previous clients, say in Philadelphia, would be persuaded to write a letter to someone he knew well, let us say in the Milwaukee area, saying in effect that a very good friend of mine is moving out your way and I'd appreciate it if you could get him into your club.

And this Milwaukee-area friend would rustle up two other members and they would proceed to recommend the murderer for membership. It did not matter whether any of the three was a prospective client or not. What mattered was that now the murderer was ready to set up shop in a new location.

"Could I see your membership list? I'm interested primarily in any members who have joined in the last year."

O'Higgins now stonewalled. "Sir, just who *are* you?"

I had been hoping he wouldn't ask the question, but since he did, I showed him the badge in my wallet. I pocketed it again before he

could squint close enough to make out *Milwaukee Police Department*. "Detective-Sergeant Henry Turnbuckle," I said, realizing too late that it might have been wiser to use an alias.

O'Higgins went to a filing cabinet and brought back a folder. He pulled out a list and pointed. "In the last year there have been only four new members."

I read the names, which meant nothing to me. "Could you give me a one- or two-sentence rundown on each of these people?"

"Well, Livingston is one of the Sheboygan Livingstons. They manufacture plumbing fixtures. Neilson is from a pioneer Fox Point family. Yarrow is a Grafton attorney and investment counselor. And Netterly just moved here from St. Louis. I don't know anything about him, but three of our members recommended him highly. He spends a lot of time here at the club. I guess he just likes to meet people."

I smiled grimly. "How true."

I went back upstairs to the bar and took a stool. "A glass of sherry, please."

The bartender regarded me dubiously and then began opening cupboard doors. After a while he came up with a bottle. "We don't get much call for this any more. Not even from women."

As I sipped my glass, I studied the bar mirror, which in turn gave me a view of the room's tables. At this early time of the day there were only a half a dozen other people in the room.

I spoke to the bartender again. "Would you happen to know if Mr. Netterly is in the clubhouse this morning?"

He pointed. "That's him over there at the table next to the terrace windows."

Netterly was a heavy-set individual of indeterminate middle age, sitting alone and looking bored.

I took my glass to the French window near him and stared out at the vista beyond. I sighed heavily. Twice.

"Something bothering you, buddy?" Netterly asked. He indicated a chair. "Sit down. I hate to drink alone."

I introduced myself as Edward Carson and we indulged in cautious banalities for about five minutes, feeling each other out, so to speak, and then, after another sigh, I came to the point. "It's the wife."

"The wife?"

"She's running around with another man. I don't know who he is, but I know he's there. And I suspect that there may even be more than one."

He sympathized. "Have you done any thinking about a divorce?"

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I laughed bitterly. "Divorce? She'd take me for all I have. When I met her, I practically picked her up out of the gutter. My family disapproved of her. Everybody did, but I wouldn't listen. Now that it's too late, I know better. I'd do almost anything to get rid of her. Sometimes I get wild ideas, like getting a gun and blowing her head off."

"Now that wouldn't solve your problem. Not unless you like going to jail."

I downed my glass in one magnificent swoop. "You wouldn't by any chance know anybody I could hire to kill my wife?"

His eyes definitely flickered. "Are you serious?"

"You're damn right I'm serious. Serious enough to pay fifty thousand to get the job done."

I let a few seconds ride by and then rose. "I'm sure there must be somebody out there willing to do the job and I'm going to go looking for him."

Netterly raised a hand. "Now just a minute there, buddy. Let's talk this over. Have another glass of what you're drinking." The bartender responded to his signal and brought us refills.

Netterly sipped his bourbon. "You're absolutely serious about hiring somebody to kill your wife?"

"Absolutely."

"It isn't just the alcohol talking?"

"No."

"And you'd pay fifty thousand dollars?"

"In cash."

He rubbed his jaw and still stared at me. "Well, I just *might* know somebody who'd do the job for you."

"Who?" I asked cagily.

He committed himself. "Me."

Obviously I could not arrest him on the spot. I had no actual proof that he had just accepted my offer. It would be my word against him. Therefore I would have to get the proof. "I don't happen to have that much money on me right now."

"I didn't expect you to."

"But I can get it. I'll meet you here again at two o'clock this afternoon."

He smiled. "I'll be waiting."

I drove to police headquarters where I requisitioned a small tape recorder which fitted neatly into my inside breast coat-pocket. The

microphone was cleverly concealed in an inconspicuous Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks button in my left lapel.

I cut up newspapers to the size of dollar bills until I had a stack approximately three inches high. I wrapped it in brown paper, sealing the package with Scotch tape.

I met Netterly again at two o'clock at the Raddison Country Club. The place was a bit more crowded now and we took a table in an alcove.

"By the way," I said, staring disapprovingly at my digital wrist-watch, "do you have the correct time?"

He glanced at his own timepiece. "It's exactly two."

I pretended to make adjustments. "This is September the fifteenth, isn't it?"

He nodded. "September the fifteenth, 1981."

I finished with my watch. "Well, let's get down to business. You haven't changed your mind, or anything? You're still going to kill my wife for me?"

"Yes."

"And you want fifty thousand dollars for the job?"

"Yes, fifty thousand dollars."

I put the package on the table. "I'm rather bad at remembering names. Did you say that your name is Clarence Netterly?"

"That's right. The name is Clarence Netterly." He picked up the package and hefted it.

I smiled. "And now I, known to you as Edward Carson, give to you at two o'clock P.M. on September the fifteenth, 1981, fifty thousand dollars to murder my wife."

"You put it in a nutshell, buddy."

I took out my wallet, preparatory to showing him my badge and making the arrest.

Netterly seemed to signal to two men at a table just outside of our alcove. They rose as one and approached. "Mr. Edward Carson," one of them said, "you are under arrest for soliciting the murder of your wife." He prepared to read me my rights.

I interrupted immediately and pointed an accusing finger at Netterly. "There is your man. The *solicitee* is the man you want."

Netterly opened his jacket, revealing a tape recorder very similar to mine. His microphone appeared to be cleverly concealed in an inconspicuous Rotary International Club button on his left lapel.

He regarded me reprovingly. "I thought I'd just go along with your offer before you went out and got somebody who really would kill

your wife. I figured this was the only way to stop you. I've got it all down here on tape."

"Officers," I said, feeling a bit warm, "we are all the victims of a misunderstanding. I have no wife and my name isn't Edward Carson. Actually I happen to be a detective-sergeant with the Milwaukee Police Department."

The two plainclothes men studied my badge and one of them shrugged. "So you got a police badge in a wallet. That don't have to mean that you're this Henry Turnbuckle. The wallet could be stolen."

We were attracting a crowd. I cleared my throat. "Look, I'm sure we can straighten this out in a more private place."

The four of us adjourned to a small anteroom where I learned that I had just met Sergeant Morrison and Acting-Detective O'Reilly.

Morrison's eyes were cold. "You're in trouble, mister, even if you are this Henry Turnbuckle. Why are you operating on our turf? Isn't Milwaukee big enough for you or do you think we can't handle our job?"

"On the contrary," I said swiftly, "I think your department is doing a magnificent job. Always has been and always will. Very professional."

While I was thinking of how to explain my presence in their territory gracefully, O'Reilly left the room. He returned shortly. "I phoned the Milwaukee Police Department. There's a Captain Johnson coming right over to see if he can identify you."

I closed my eyes. "Now that wasn't at *all* necessary. The captain is a *busy* man. We could have thrashed this out all by ourselves."

Captain Johnson made his appearance twenty minutes later. He walked slowly around my chair three or four times and then stepped back to study me. "Yes," he said after thirty seconds of scrutiny, "that's Henry all right. I'd swear to it."

Frankly I don't know why it took him so long to identify me.

He smiled. "Well, well, Henry, so you got yourself into a little trouble?"

I was allowed to leave after I promised Captain Johnson that I would report to his office bright and early the next morning for appropriate disciplinary action.

On my way home I bought a bottle of sherry. It was the second one this year.

In the evening I was hard at work on a Sunday-sized crossword puzzle when Ralph appeared at my door.

He beamed. "Henry, I see you done it again. Led us right to the murderer. He's now in custody."

I blinked and then recovered my aplomb. "Ah, ha. Just as I suspected. Netterly is the killer after all. However, he suspected a trap and so very cannily used a ploy to throw the hounds of justice off the tracks."

"No, Henry. The murderer isn't Netterly."

Not Netterly? Then if it wasn't Netterly who in the world could it be? I smote my forehead soundly. But, of course. *O'Higgins*. The club's working secretary. *He* would be in a position to know all the club members and their problems. I chuckled. "Off hand, I venture to say that the murderer's name is *O'Higgins*."

"No, Henry. Not *O'Higgins* either. Lionel Casterbridge."

"Lionel Casterbridge?"

Ralph believed in stringing it out. "After you left the country club, Captain Johnson decided he might as well go to the bar and have a quick one. He recognized the bartender and remembered that he should still be on parole. And when you're on parole, the last job in the world you're allowed to get is bartending. So Johnson introduced himself. The bartender got pale, began shaking, and looked like he was going to run or faint. In other words, he overreacted. So Johnson figured he might have more here than just a parole violation. He took the man aside and began asking questions. The bartender wasn't the kind who can stand any pressure. He stumbled all over his toes, let a few things slip, and then finally cracked wide-open."

I grasped the situation. "And the bartender's name is Lionel Casterbridge?"

"No, Henry. Charley Stevens."

I exerted magnificent control over my temper. "Then who the devil is this Lionel Casterbridge?"

"He and Stevens were cellmates in Waupon and got paroled at about the same time. When Stevens got his bartending job he started listening to the customers and then got a bright idea. People will tell bartenders more things than they would a psychiatrist. He just collected his information and passed it on to Casterbridge, who made the personal contacts, did the negotiating, and handled the killings. They split the take fifty-fifty."

Ralph smiled. "The captain says you can forget about reporting to his office tomorrow morning. All is forgiven."

I went to the window and looked out at the dismal stars in the dismal night.

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"Henry," Ralph said, "you ought to go out more. See people. Live the Book of Life."

"Ralph, one cannot live the Book of Life. One barely has time enough to read the Table of Contents, much less thumb through the Index. Besides, I had an uncle who died of gusto. It's a horrible way to go."

Nevertheless I poured myself another glass of sherry.



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